

**LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES**  
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Waterfowl Population Estimates  
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below  
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Nov. 3-5, 2008  
Catahoula Lake: Oct. 30, 2008  
Northwest LA: Oct. 29, 2008  
Northeast LA: Oct 30-31, 2008

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November 7, 2008

Pilot: B. Dorsa

Estimates made from Aircraft (\*\*) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	22,000	6,000	**	28,000
MOTTLED	32,000	19,000		51,000
GADWALL	245,000	74,000	1,000	320,000
WIGEON	2,000	3,000	4,000	9,000
GW TEAL	164,000	43,000	5,000	212,000
BW TEAL	80,000	19,000	14,000	113,000
SHOVELER	95,000	2,000	21,000	118,000
PINTAIL	29,000	31,000	28,000	88,000
TOTAL DABBLERS	669,000	197,000	73,000	939,000
SCAUP	1,000	**		1,000
RINGNECKED	14,000	3,000	1,000	18,000
CANVASBACK				0
TOTAL DIVERS	15,000	3,000	1,000	19,000
TOTAL DUCKS	684,000	200,000	74,000	958,000
COOTS	384,000	253,000	1,000	638,000

**COMMENTS:**

The estimate of 958,000 ducks on this survey is 40% lower than last November's estimate of 1.6 million, less than half of the 30-year average (2.1 million), and is the lowest November estimate since this survey began. Of the 40 November surveys completed since 1969, the 4 lowest estimates have occurred in the last 6 years (2008, 2004, 2003, and 2005). Compared to November 2007, there were fewer of all species except green-winged teal (212,000 vs 163,000) and about the same number of

mallards. All species except shovelers were below their long-term November averages. Blue-winged teal (113,000 vs 455,000), gadwalls (320,000 vs 498,000), and pintails (88,000 vs 198,000) showed the biggest differences from last November's estimates.

As we have seen since January of 2006, the distribution of ducks in coastal Louisiana was skewed toward the west. Nearly 80% of the total ducks in coastal Louisiana were seen on the southwest transects with large concentrations noted on the east side of Rockefeller Refuge, portions of Sabine and Lacassine NWRs, and in the flooded agricultural fields northwest of Lacassine. Still, the 684,000 ducks estimated in southwest Louisiana is only half of the 1.38 million seen in 2007. Indeed, that accounts for the difference in totals from last year. Southeast Louisiana and Catahoula Lake had similar numbers of ducks as in 2007; the big difference was seen in southwest Louisiana. In southeast Louisiana, the only notable concentrations of ducks were seen at Delta NWR and Pass-a-Loutre WMA near the mouth of the Mississippi River and in the Caernarvon area.

An additional 142,000 ducks and 98,000 geese (65% white-fronts, 35% snow geese) were counted in select habitats of northeast Louisiana. This is substantially higher than the 84,000 ducks and 63,000 geese counted last year and higher than counts reported in 2004 and 2005. However, it is far below the 2006 counts of 316,000 ducks and 214,000 geese when excessive late-October rainfall and early cold weather created habitat and migration conditions that led to such high numbers in that portion of the state. On this survey, good water conditions were found in the backwaters and swamps of the major river systems, but despite widespread flooding from hurricanes Gustav and Ike in September, very little flooded agricultural habitat remained. Shovelers and pintails were the most abundant species followed by gadwall, green-winged and blue-winged teal, and concentrations of ducks were noted at Grand Cote NWR and managed impoundments east of Bonita and east of Monterey.

We counted another 14,000 ducks on the northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. Similar to the northeast Louisiana survey, this is higher than the 11,000 counted last year and 12,000 in 2005, but far below the 21,000 counted in 2006. Gadwalls and mallards were the most abundant species, accounting for 2/3 of the total ducks seen. The largest concentration was seen on a set of managed impoundments near Loggy Bayou WMA, but good groups were seen at Lock 5 on the Red River and Toledo Bend reservoir.

Although we are generally seeing fewer ducks during the November survey in recent years, there are 3 factors that have likely contributed to this year's low estimate. First, we have experienced relatively warm temperatures, and states to the north have reported a delayed migration. Only 1 significant cold front has moved through the state and brought with it the first group of migrants during the week of October 20<sup>th</sup>. In addition, we have received very little rainfall since the September hurricanes, and much of the flooding from those storms has either dried up or been drained for agricultural purposes. The result is relatively dry conditions in the agricultural areas of southwest, central, and northeastern Louisiana. Lastly, the impacts of hurricanes Gustav and Ike have been substantial. The storm surges and associated high-salinity flood waters have impacted the coastal marsh similar to the 2005 storms without as much structural damage. Most submerged aquatic vegetation, a primary food source for migrating and wintering waterfowl was either scoured away or killed by excessive salinity. Emergent marsh plants were similarly impacted, and some areas of broken marsh, especially the fresh and intermediate marsh in southeast Louisiana were eroded away. Levees and water-control structures, such as those at Pointe-aux-Chenes and Dewey Wills WMAs, were damaged, reducing the quality of wetland habitat. Taken together, these 3 factors have created conditions where we might expect to see fewer ducks.

In 2005, similar or worse habitat conditions were more widespread as a result of hurricanes Katrina and

Rita which were followed by an extended dry period. In November of that year, our estimate was nearly 1.3 million ducks and we saw average numbers of wintering ducks later in the season. With that experience, the number of pumps we saw working during our survey to flood additional habitat, and reports of sub-freezing temperatures and substantial snowfall in the Dakotas, we are hopeful for improved habitat conditions and additional ducks as the migration continues.